

Have you ever wondered what roller coasters were like in the past or how they were invented? Read the article to find out and answer the questions that follow.

### Word Bank

**Golden Age of Roller Coasters**—a period during the 1920s when roller coasters were very popular

**gravity ride**—any ride that uses gravity for power

**theme park**—an amusement park built around an idea, such as a historical event or entertainment personality

**whiplash**—a severe sprain of the neck caused by sudden movement or twisting of the head

## Coaster History

*by Gil Chandler*

- 1 The Russians built the very first **gravity rides** in the 1600s. In winter, they built high wooden ramps and covered them with water, which soon became ice. The ramps were about two feet (.6 meter) wide—just wide enough for a small sled.
- 2 Passengers would climb a 70-foot (21-meter) ladder, then sit down on the sled. A helper pushed the sled onto the ramp. Down it went, speeding to the bottom of the hill and then coasting to a stop along a 600-foot (183-meter) straightaway.
- 3 People in big cities and small villages enjoyed the ice slides. They were built outside in public parks and even inside in fancy palaces. Some of the ramps had lanterns for night sliding.
- 4 In the early 1800s, a French builder brought the “Russian mountains” to Paris, the capital of France. But Russia was much colder than France, where ice turned soft in the warmer, rainy winters. So the French ran their sleds over wooden rollers. This is the origin of the term “roller coaster.”

### Coasters Cross the Atlantic

- 5 In the 1870s, an old mining railway became the first gravity ride in the United States. This was the *Mauch Chunk Switchback Railway* in Pennsylvania. A steam engine

hauled the cars up a mountain. The cars then coasted down at six miles (10 kilometers) per hour. Passengers on the *Mauch Chunk Railway* paid five cents a ride.

6 In 1884, LaMarcus A. Thompson designed a new coaster for Coney Island, an amusement park in Brooklyn, New York. Thompson's *Switchback Gravity Pleasure Railway* was a big hit. Thompson built 44 more of these rides in North America and Europe.

7 Other coaster inventors like Phillip Hinckle and Lina Beecher began working at Coney Island. Hinckle was the first to use a chain lift to get his cars up the hill. Beecher built the *Flip-Flap*, the first coaster to run upside-down through a loop. The cars had to go so fast to make it through the loop, however, that several riders suffered **whiplash**. The *Flip-Flap* soon shut down.

8 By the 20th century, roller coasters had much more than single cars and simple ramps. The builders put tracks through turns, hills, and figure-eights. The inventor John Miller added a third set of wheels, known as undertrack wheels. The undertrack wheels held the cars firmly on the track at high speeds and through sharp turns.

### The Golden Age

9 Roller coasters were all the rage in the 1920s. Designers were making them taller, longer, and faster. Some lift hills climbed as high as 100 feet (30 meters).



The *Cyclone*, built in 1927, is still a popular ride today. It is one of the most copied roller coasters in the world, with seven "clones" throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan.

The Coney Island *Cyclone*, built in 1927, rose 85 feet (26 meters) and ran at 55 miles (89 kilometers) per hour over eight steep hills.

- 10 The Depression of the 1930s and World War II (1939–1945) put an end to this **Golden Age of Roller Coasters**. Fewer people were going to amusement parks. There was a shortage of the money and materials needed to build new rides. Instead of raising new coasters, workers were tearing down hundreds of them.

## Disneyland

- 11 In 1955, Walt Disney reversed this trend. He built a new amusement park in Anaheim, California. This was the first **theme park**, Disneyland.

- 12 In 1959, the *Matterhorn* opened at Disneyland. This was a steel roller coaster that turned and twisted down the sides of a miniature steel-and-concrete mountain. At the end of the ride, the cars—four-passenger bobsleds—splashed through a pool of water. It became one of the most popular rides in Disneyland.

- 13 Other theme parks appeared around the country. Each had a new roller coaster. At Six Flags Over Mid-America, in Eureka, Missouri, the *Screamin' Eagle* rose 110 feet (34 meters). In 1975, it was the highest wooden coaster in the world.